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Dealing with Extension's Partners: What's Ethical?

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Abstract: A 90-minute staff development session was created to examine ethical issues of working with Extension's external partners. The session used a two-part case (included), as well as small and large group discussion to frame issues related to working with funders and partners outside of Extension. The participants in the session worked out ideas and guidelines for dealing ethically with external partners. The case discussion technique was rated highly on evaluations of the session.

Introduction

Given reduced funding by state and federal governments, Extension organizations have no choice but to seek alternative revenues (Hughes & Ledbetter, 2009; Jackson & Johnson, 1999; Stiehl, Bessey, & Schmall, 1992). While pursuing such funding is becoming standard practice, there are still challenges associated with this opportunity (Renault, 2006; Jackson & Johnson, 1999; Vijh, 1996; Deaton, 1993). Extension professionals have expressed ethical concerns about pursuing Extension-related grants and developing fee-based programs that compete with for-profit organizations. Both Sauer (1991) and Wilson (1985) have strongly suggested deliberate preparation is needed in preparing Extension personnel regarding such issues.

To address the concerns stated by campus and field faculty, an educational session was designed to be part of the annual University of Minnesota Extension Program Conference. The session, following principles outlined by Barth, Stryker, Arrington, and Syed (1999), allowed Extension professionals to examine whether, and to what extent, the source of funding influences Extension programming and research, and to begin to develop guidelines for such interactions. Extension sought the assistance of an external specialist to design and lead this session—a professor of marketing who specialized in business ethics.

The use of cases has been found to be an effective way to actively engage learners in an issue (Theroux & Kilbane, 2004; Frymier & Shulman, 1995), especially if the case has high content relevance (Finney & Pike 2009). As a result, a two-part case that required no prior preparation on the part of the participant was written

collectively by the ethics specialist and an Extension faculty member. Following suggestions by Churchill and Iacobucci (2002), the case was pretested on an Extension faculty member, and minor suggested changes were made.

Session Logistics

A 90-minute session was allocated to this issue and titled "Dealing with Extension's Partners: What's Ethical?" (For complete teaching notes, see <<http://tinyurl.com/284pfou>>.) After a short introduction by a moderator, the presenter discussed the following points (20 minutes):

- State and federal funding for our programs is down.
- Yet, we must continue our research-based education programs.
- Solution? Write grant requests (especially to foundations and for-profit organizations); and deliver fee-based programs and conferences that sometimes compete with for-profit programs.
- But this strategy can create ethical dilemmas.
 - ◆ Our customers may not see us as objective sources of research-based education.
 - ◆ We may not see ourselves as being objective.
 - ◆ How do we resolve the dilemmas just listed? What factors should we consider? What guidelines should we adopt?

To address the questions raised, participants engaged in extensive discussion of a two-part case.

Part A of the case presented ethical dilemmas that faculty experience in dealing with funding by external partners (see Appendix). Participants worked in self-selected groups of three for a 20-minute time period. The session leader then led a broad, all-class discussion with regard to discussions by the individual groups (15 minutes). The discussion focused on the following points.

- How funding by external partners could help the Extension mission (e.g., allows us to operate and grow) or hurt our mission (e.g. can start driving our mission, can sidetrack our mission if funding/program is not properly set up and managed).
- The fact that even for-profit firms have a mission that goes beyond simply making a profit (e.g., read their mission statements for evidence of this fact).
- How asking for more formal funding is different from merely accepting free product (a more formal relationship is developed resulting in more rules by Sponsored Projects Administration, for example).

- In order to more explicitly tie the case into other Extension situations, implications for fee-based Extension programs were also discussed.

Part B of the case was then distributed (see Appendix). This part required participants, again in the same groups of three, to design strategies and guidelines for ethically seeking funding and working with Extension partners.

After an all-class discussion about Part B (10 minutes), the session leader summarized key points. The session leader then offered some personal reflections about what appeared to be psychological barriers that Extension faculty have toward seeking external funding and delivering fee-based programs that compete with for-profit programs. This was followed by a general discussion by the entire audience. Participants agreed that follow-up discussion on a presenter- moderated online forum would be appreciated.

Evaluation

After the conference, a customized on-line survey was sent to each participant of the session. Sixty-two percent of 50 session participants completed the survey. Survey results found that the three reasons people attended this session were 1) appeal of the "ethics" theme for the session; 2) met continuing education standards for certified "investigators" at the university; and 3) appeal that the main speaker was external to Extension. Seventy-four percent felt the speaker's credentials as a business professor added value/credibility for the session.

The use of the case was very well received by both campus and field Extension faculty, suggesting there is no need to have different cases for the various types of Extension professionals. Seventy-four percent believed they were able to transfer the issues presented into their own specific job, while 73% felt they could relate to "Richard" (the fictitious researcher in the case).

The use of small discussion groups in the session was also well received. Over 90% believed that working in small groups was an effective way to encourage reflection on the issues, while only 3% believed working independently would have been better. Open-ended comments were very positive, with a suggested change that more time is allocated to the session.

Summary

Perceived ethical dilemmas are a concern to Extension faculty who now find themselves being asked to write more grant requests (especially to foundations and for-profit organizations) and deliver fee-based programs and conferences that sometimes compete with for-profit programs. The use of the two-part case to showcase and discuss many of the ethical dilemmas and issues was deemed successful for University of Minnesota Extension. We hope to repeat this session at future conferences with the same curriculum but with more time, and we encourage other Extension organizations to consider the use of this methodology and the cases developed to discuss the important topic of ethics (Zimdahl, 2005).

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Appendix

Case Part A (Background scenario and initial discussion questions)

"I just want to conduct sound, unbiased fertilizer research . . ." Richard

Richard has been an Extension faculty member for many years working in production agriculture--specifically corn and soybean management. Richard is rather distraught as Extension has whittled his programmatic funding allocation to essentially zeroâ Extension has justified this based on the reduction in state funding and the flat-funding of federal dollars. As a result, Richard indicated that he is being asked to generate "income" funds that will support his research efforts as well as the operating

expenses of the educational products and events he produces. While charging for these products and events results in some income, Richard realizes that he can not fund his research efforts with this sales income, thus, he (and all other Extension personnel) has been encouraged by Extension administration to write (research and/or educational) grants to support his production agricultural program.

Richard is struggling with writing grants to crop-input companies for funding because he believes his credibility is at risk by forming formal collaborations with individual companies. Richard has long-standing relationships with fertilizer companies such as Terra, CF Industries, PCS, Agrium and Mosaic. In Richard's many research and demonstration plots across Minnesota, Richard has included many, if not all, of their products in the plots.

But, as Richard quickly points out, most individual companies have much different objectives than the University and establishing formal relationships with them that include funding seems to lower his professional credibility. These companies' goals are to sell more products as business success is clearly evident to Richard and fellow Extension personnel. Richard has been able to work with them as he maintains his credibility by being an unbiased third-party resource for the end-users (farmers). Accepting funds from one or more of these companies seems to imply to him that he is in "cahoots" with the company and this perception worries Richard. After all, the organization would certainly promote the fact that they are funding his research efforts because these companies value the tie to the University.

Richard has worked with all of these companies over the years and has used their products (often at gratis) but he could always clearly state to his audience that he did not get funds from these companies! He worries about his credibilityâbut he needs the funding!

Richard also is not thrilled about the time and effort any grant efforts may require of him. He is so busy already that all the forms and process required for grant submission are frustrating to him. He also does not believe that his individual dealings with the companies, and their personnel, are any of the University's business!

Questions

- 1. The mission of UM Extension is research-based education. UM Extension faculty have always prided themselves in being objective and unbiased. How can soliciting external grants from for-profit firms help Extension achieve that mission? How might soliciting such grants hinder that mission?*
- 2. For-profit businesses such as Terra are only in business to make a profit. Discuss fully.*
- 3. Why would companies (such as fertilizer company Terra in the case) want to partner with UM Extension? What do they get out of it?*
- 4. In the past, Richard has solicited and accepted free product from manufacturers (free fertilizer). How is asking for grant money different?*

Case Part B (Extended background scenario and follow-up discussion questions)

"I just want to conduct sound, unbiased fertilizer research . . ." Richard Part B

Richard really felt strongly about not asking private businesses for grants. So he spent his time and effort over the past several months trying to secure federal and international grants. For example, he considered writing a grant request to the National Research Institute (NRI), which receives its funding from the USDA.

This has been unsuccessful, however. It seems most grant money from these sources are going to conduct laboratory and/or theoretical research that Richard values to a lesser degree. After all, Extension administration has always valued his efforts that impact farmers at the local level and he does not want to change that.

Richard has also been reading more University-wide publications lately, and has come to the conclusion that it's not only Extension that is being asked to find non-state support for its programs. It seems the state is unable or unwilling to fund the University's missions as it has in the past. As a result, more and more partnerships with foundations and for-profit organizations are occurring.

And he was pleasantly surprised when he had a conversation with an Extension colleague recently who had developed a close partnership with a for-profit firm. The complete results of that partnership won't be known for years of course, but the initial results seemed positive.

So, Richard is considering jumping in and taking a shot at making stronger ties with foundations and for-profit organizations. Still, he is concerned about how his customers (farmers) will react to this behavior. Will they still see Richard as unbiased and objective, or as someone who is "in bed" with big business?

"Maybe I need to make some guidelines for myself," he thought, "as I talk to companies and foundations." He pulled out a pad of paper and began to think.

Questions

- 1. What are some guidelines that Extension faculty could adopt to help guide their efforts at establishing relationships and solicit grants from foundations and for-profit organizations?*
- 2. How can Richard manage customer (i.e., the farmers he deals with) perceptions of his credibility if Richard accepts grant money from foundations and for-profit organizations?*
- 3. Are there any other issues Richard needs to consider as he moves forward to seek funding from foundations and for-profit organizations?*

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